Parents’ perspectives on the National Child Measurement Programme

An analysis of online parenting forums between 2010 and 2016

Background and Rationale

The National Child Measurement Programme has provided nationally representative datasets for children in the first and last year of primary school, with a high participation of around 95% of eligible children. Some parents of overweight children have voiced negative reactions to feedback telling them that their child is overweight, and there is also some evidence that children who are not included due to their parents opting-out of measurements on their behalf may be more likely to be children at the extremes of the BMI distribution. While it is important to hear the views of the parents who do not support the programme, they are a minority. Very little research has investigated the narratives of parents who think the programme is necessary or useful, or how parents with different viewpoints may interact to reach, or fail to reach, consensus.

The aim of the current study was to explore discussions about the NCMP between parents on two online parenting forums. This approach made it possible to observe the issues that are important to parents themselves, rather than assessing responding to a researcher- or clinician-led agenda.

While commissioners and school nurses are very aware of parent objections since the start of the NCMP in 2006, some report a perception that objectives have declined over time. To facilitate an overview of the frequency and focus of discussion topics over time, the fora were assessed from 2010 until summer 2016.

Methods

Data extraction and collection.

A Google search was first conducted to identify the parenting forums to be used for analysis. Parenting forums were only included in the study if they:

i) related to children without disabilities,

ii) focused on general parenting (e.g. not single parenting, family holidays, or parents’ dating).

Two fora were identified: Mumsnet.co.uk and Netmums.co.uk

The search function of each site was used to identify the post threads for analysis using the terms ‘National Child Measurement Programme’ and ‘NCMP’. Threads were included only if their main focus was the NCMP (e.g. threads about childhood excess weight in general without mentioning the programme were excluded). Fifty-
five threads were identified, of which 33 were eligible for this study, comprising a total of over 2300 comments.

Analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to find emerging themes in parents’ discussions about the NCMP. All the initial posts and further comment threads were read, and the main concepts and topics were noted as initial codes. The codes were then collated into similar clusters to form emergent themes, selecting representative quotes for each theme for illustration.

Results

Six themes emerged from the data, and they were organised into a structure so that they revolved around three main points of two-sided debate:

(Un)Necessary Weight Feedback

- **‘Nobody knows your child better than you’**
  - Disagreement and shock at weight result
  - Strong negative emotions: furious, annoyed, frustrated, upset
  - Found the letter patronising
  - The programme needs to take into account more variables than only height and weight (family genetics, individual lifestyle factors)
  - BMI alone is not a reliable measure
  - Thought that as parents they were better placed than nurses to know whether their child is overweight, and would tackle any weight problems if and when they arise
  - Some acknowledged their child’s excess weight and said that the programme is therefore unhelpful for them (as they already know)
  - Interventions should target other areas of children’s lives than the family home

- **‘Some parents need a reminder’**
  - Saw the letter as only a gentle guidance and advice aiming to help and support parents with the maintenance of their child’s excess weight
  - Argued that parents are often unaware, ‘blind’ to their child’s weight issues, and in these cases a friendly reminder is useful
  - People are generally becoming larger as a society, which can also lead to parents’ misconceptions of healthy weight and overweight concerning their children
  - The weight feedback could act as a wake-up call in some families and lead to a change in lifestyle
  - It is easier to achieve behaviour change in children at a younger age than when they are older
  - Argued for the use of BMI as a feasible population measure
Weight Discussion or Weight Obsession?

‘Unhealthy weight obsession’
- Disagreed with the emphasis on the importance of weight by the programme as they believed weight is not that relevant to health
- Fear that the measurements lead to comparisons, complexes or even eating disorders in children
- Judged the danger of eating disorders due to the measurement as higher than the health risks of excess weight
- Associated the weighing with the idealisation of a modern, ideal, slim body shape
- Perceived the BMI chart’s healthy range to be ‘small’ and disagreed with the notion that all children should be compared to that chart
- Parents’ own childhood weight issues or those of someone in the family very often reported
- Also frequent mentions of their child(ren)’s already-existing complexes related to eating which they thought the measurements could make more severe

‘Healthy weight discussion’
- Suggested that weight awareness should be seen as a normal part of life and health management; if healthy discussions are started with children, complexes can be avoided
- The programme simply aims to encourage these discussions
- Believed that the ‘normal weight’ concept is meant in terms of health rather than in terms of aesthetics
- Explained that the measurements are carried out in a sensitive and confidential way to minimise the risk of weight complexes in children; telling the children is the parents’ choice
- Said that BMI charts still contain a wide range of healthy (wider than some might think), therefore a high BMI centile can flag up a weight issue
- Suggested children would naturally not be too conscious about weight

Intrusion or Intervention?

‘Nanny state’
- Mistrust in the government’s role in children’s health
- The government perceived as interfering in families’ lives inappropriately
- Spoke about the lack of information about the aims with the collected data
- Objections to sharing of confidential information with GP
- Recognise the issue, but criticise the system of ‘measurements with no follow up’

‘Evidence based policy…. how can that be wrong?*
- Asserted: these statistics are needed for the government to monitor the rate of the issue and any changes and to plan ahead
- Statistics also used as evidence in arguments for the introduction of intervention programmes to tackle childhood obesity
- The data collection is at a population level, and the government does not draw conclusions about individual children; need to see the bigger picture
- Reducing obesity is also public interest as its treatment costs taxpayers money
Summary and Implications

While most discussion threads on online fora were largely initiated by parents criticising the NCMP (as was expected), the study showed that overall parents spontaneously voiced views both in favour and against the NCMP. That is, some parents were interested enough, and supportive enough of the scheme to be willing to challenge others online. However, while the discussions were often detailed and lengthy, we did not observe parents with positive viewpoints appearing to shift the attitudes or opinions of those starting from a strongly critical point of view. Nonetheless, other threads were initiated by parents seeking information and advice of what to make of the feedback they had received, and in these cases there was greater openness to considering other parents’ perspectives.

The findings could be useful to practitioners and policy makers concerned with providing a rationale to support the NCMP to schools, parents or other professionals, by demonstrating what types of argument parents consider relevant and acceptable. This may be particularly useful if the practice is continued when the NCMP is no longer a requirement. It also provides evidence that there are parents who strongly support the NCMP, just as there are those who strongly object. Positive arguments raised by supportive parents included:

- the need to help parents identify when children are overweight given increasing body sizes (i.e., when overweight is normal, it is hard to judge children accurately by sight)
- the provision of a useful nudge or wake-up call to those families who are aware, but have not got round to taking action
- the perception that intervening early with children is easier than tackling more entrenched weight issues later down the line
- acknowledgement that the NCMP is conducted in a sensitive way, and could lead to helpful discussions on healthy lifestyles with children
- recognition of the need for the government to monitor childhood obesity given the associated costs of obesity to the taxpayer, and therefore for parents to see the ‘bigger picture’ and allow their child to take part for the benefit of all.

In addition to the reasons for objection to the NCMP detailed in the previous section, a number of misperceptions were revealed that may be useful for teams implementing the NCMP to address:

- mistrust that measurements and feedback are confidential
- lack of understanding that the range of BMIs considered a normal or healthy weight is very broad (i.e., accommodates children with larger and slighter builds)
- lack of understanding how to use charts to see where their child’s falls in comparison to their peers.

The final, full report is currently being prepared for publication; further details will be available within that report in due course.